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Wayne State University - Humanities Center 10th Anniversary
The Question of Freedom

Prolegomena to a Becoming-Free:
Mapping Liberty over Female Bodies, Identities and Multiculturalism

The contemporary question of freedom encompasses the various movements of liberation that followed a dissemination of the ideas and ideals of the Eighteenth Century. The narrative, started by the Enlightenment thinkers, gradually led to the conviction that human beings had a right to freedom. Furthermore, freedom was deemed a reasonable goals and its value universal. The numerous particular becomings of freedom throughout the Western world and along the last two centuries were sustained, until the late Seventies, by the general practical belief that Freedom meant to no longer be submitted to arbitrary or dogmatic forms of coercion. They were founded on a common ethical postulate: that such freedom was good for all human beings.

Historically, though, freedom has been defined on the basis of personal conceptions. For Epictetus, being free meant remaining independent from exterior circumstances and being the master of one's representations, thoughts, and opinions, in all situations. Descartes' complex system included the freedom to be indifferent, but its highest form was an increased ability to determine oneself and ultimately consisted only in the ability to act: "free, spontaneous and willing [were] one and the same thing."[1] Spinoza discerned two types of liberty, the false one was an absence of necessity, the true one a rational knowledge of one's self and affections. Montesquieu's freedom was philosophical, it consisted in being able to exercise one's will, as well as finding ways of being politically safe. Rousseau's freedom read

negatively: instead of acting as one pleased, being free meant not being forced to do what someone else wanted. This freedom depended upon laws. At roughly the same time, Kant was defining freedom as that which knowledge cannot reach, the condition of morality one would access through a practical form of reason. More recently, Bergson introduced a psychological dimension to freedom when presenting it as the expression of our deep and real personality. Finally, Sartre taught us that freedom was anything but being able to do anything. For Sartre freedom is a sentence, we are condemned to be free, but it is a sentence to life. Despite such variations, in the wake of the Enlightenment we had learned to perceive freedom as a multi-faceted and yet unique principle, one that both structures and supercedes a human condition characterized by individual autonomy.

However, by the end of the twentieth century, so many subtle mechanisms of oppression had been explored that the various claims and struggles called for a renewed discussion about the nature and meaning of freedom. After slaves and the proletariat being the center of the principal discourses of liberation, theory focused on various issues such as colonies, women, gays, minorities, fetuses, animals and our planet itself. This shift showed the need to partially redefine Freedom differently for each object of study. It also led from calls for particular ways of understanding freedom to claims that freedom should no longer be understood in general terms. Nevertheless, the following analysis of women's liberation will show that the present tendency to abandon a consensual definition of Freedom in fact poses a threat to the future of its individualized meanings. I contend that, in terms of freedom, a universalist perspective and particular focuses are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, both theoretical approaches are necessary in order to further feminist *engagements* that crystallize the "movement that fights for the social equality of the sexes through the strategy of making sexual difference operative."[2]

During a conference at Wayne State University in 1999, Martha Nussbaum proposed to contemplate the possibility of a borderless feminism.[3] Globalization was then on everyone's agenda. Her title "Feminist Internationalism" fit well into the world awareness mandate. Therefore, it could have gone unnoticed. However, the association of the two terms challenged the fundamental rule that had resulted from the fertile cross-pollination of the cultural and multiculturalist theories of the Nineties: we were not to speak for a woman that did not share the same components of our cultural identity.[4] Whereas the principle was sound, its strict application was leading to an *aporia*: in order to respect all women, a feminist had to exclude from her qualifications all but one of them, herself. The academic scene offered a paradoxical spectacle. While feminist conferences multiplied exponentially, the focus of each participant became increasingly narrow. By 1999, the field of studies was striated by dozens of lines of liberating flights that mostly diverged. At this point, Nussbaum announced her recentering intentions: she would speak for women on a planetary scale. Indirectly, but provocatively, she posed the question of our participation in others' becoming free. The paper's subtitle clarified her stance: as the objective of the reflection was promised an anachronistic and controversial "Defense of Universal Values."[5]

Nussbaum's apology also challenged the dominant way of representing and disseminating the core concepts of post-modernity. As it was proclaimed, *po-mo* had emptied the term “value” of any meaning. It had also made of “universality” one of the main leitmotivs of colonialist, ethnocentric or patriarchal discourses. Indeed this is right: it is often in the name of universals and the so-called human nature that nations and religions justify their aggressive invasion of territories, bodies or minds. But it is wrong as well. While there is no denying the influence of personal narratives on any movements of liberation, if it is

deprived of the concept of a common worth, a gesture of *engagement* can only point to one's self or a limited group with specific interests. Instead of occupying it, this form of commitment to a cause eventually only intersects with the public sphere. Yet, numerous newly created women's studies courses that relied on "life histories treated as documentary evidence" inscribed their critique in the margins of post-modernity.[6] And post-modernity was presented as and praised for posing itself in opposition to the Enlightenment.[7] Consequently, discarding such ethical ideas as general value or universal freedom was logically advocated. To the humanistic tradition of its early founders or its European predecessors, the section of cultural studies focusing on women presented a significant historicized and relativized interpretations of oppression. It contradicted rather than complemented a universal conception of the tenets of freedom.[8]

However, a partial critique of a unique good and its correlative concepts had already been woven in the thought of the Enlightenment. Although not clearly referenced, it was radicalized by cultural studies and opened numerous fields where to anatomize liberations. Just as rapidly populating their newly constituted theoretical arena, the relatively compact corpus of demands that were labeled feminist exploded. Two hundred years of previous struggle had defined specific issues over both time and borders. They were originally expressed in terms of equality and freedom: to be educated, to work, to refuse marriage, to retain some possession in marriage, to decline marital sex.[9] In the twentieth century, a second group of feminists included decent working conditions, free unions, sexual choices, equal pay, control over one's reproduction as women's rights. They also added legal demands: childcare and support protection against rape or other more subtle violence, such as harassment. The ground covered by these civil struggles aimed at guaranteeing that, by law, all women enjoyed the same freedom as men in the personal and professional realms. Today,

a basic Internet search links to numerous other fields as a third wave of feminism superposes dozens of specific focuses and local interests to previously comprehensive goals.[10]

So many facets of feminist approaches are differentiated at this point, that thinking abstractly in terms of women's liberation, as if such concept was a "thing-in-itself," is very perplexing. Countless cultural phenomena materialize the idea of freedom. They give the word "feminism" itself multiple meanings depending on its national anchoring. Even within the singular US context, the work accomplished in women's studies has revealed its complexity. Although Feminism is a word common to all variants: Amazon- Anarcho-, Cultural-, Erotic-, Eco-, Women of Color-, Individualist-, i, Libertarian-, Marxist-, Socialist-, Material-, Radical-, Separatist-, Lesbian- feminisms, the organizing principles, agenda, focus, and members of each branch can radically differ or even exclude each other. Consequently, attempts to confront feminism with a general questioning may seem invalid. That includes the very one that legitimated it in the first place: the question of freedom and its value for women whose membership in a gender overarches all other identity components, socially constructed or not.

On the other hand, the variety of feminist/women's studies productions is adding unprecedented dimensions to the concept of feminism. This profusion of theoretical and local claims is a key instrument to ponder not only the current meaning of women's freedom, but also the objectives to give to it. The French word of *sens* encapsulates the dual aspect at work in this reflection. *Sens* as signification confronts us with the necessity to appropriate the word "freedom." *Sens* as direction ties the concept to its *telos*. Since they all concern women as one of the two human groups, to what unified end is the current kaleidoscope of feminist claims designed? Can a theoretically infinite number of personal concerns coexist with the original goal of feminism whose dimension is, by default, universal? As an increasingly microscopic

study of women is practiced in academia, has a macrocosmic feminine condition become obsolete? Is a global defense of women's freedom still a goal we can advocate to our students? Or is it only a pretext to fulfill what is now called the feminists' dream of "symbolic conquest of the world of Otherness?"[11]

The plethora of discourses generated by the various feminisms is paralleled by the efforts of numerous associations and individuals to repeal the collective limits to the freedom of women as a group.[12] Yet, these two pools of feminists have, de facto, opposite interests. This is true even when their members are active on both ends of the theory-practice continuum. Women's studies framed critique must dissect the woman's body and psyche into micro-segments if it wants to increase its power and expand as a field of studies. Otherwise, feminist activism at large needs to maintain the ideal-idea of a female unity in order to consolidate its political and social efficiency.[13] The example of the gay and lesbian practical association has proven that a critical mass is the key to realize empirical changes. On the contrary, the strong impact of identity politics on feminist social analysis has resulted in a fragmented image of femininity. While being intellectually fascinating, it is also pragmatically precarious.

Outside of Academia, in what the *They* call the "real world," the feminist emerging from the last twenty years of theoretical de- and re-constructing is often perceived as a comic book character, lesbian, separatist, victimized and men-hating. This caricature undoubtedly stems from the media's carelessly reading texts famous for their extreme positions and feeding the public's taste for dramatic oversimplifications.[14] The fact remains that feminism is still, or once again, the object of public indifference, if not derision. It is even the target of sheer lies.[15] In any case, it is no longer systematically perceived to be an instrument of women's liberation.

The lack of clarity and adequacy regarding what women do, when they study women, results from various factors. They generate not only misinformation but also antagonism. We therefore need to wonder what kind of part we, as feminists partaking in women's studies, may play in the disconnection between the actual progress that often originates in academic programs, and the regression of feminism as a synonym for freedom.[16] Although students flock to women's studies programs, many women are unaware of their beneficial impact. They consequently fail to support feminism, even out of principle. Exploring our responsibility is urgent because, in a democracy, no progressive movement can be sustained, inside and beyond its borders without a wide network of both prominent and invisible supporters.

Part of our responsibility may be in our abandoning concepts such as value and universality. The opponents to women's autonomy make ample use of these. In the name of their being Platonic, Western, pre-post-colonialist, male constructs, we have understandably deconstructed a series of pillars upon which the feminist movement, as predominantly occidental, was originally built. The resulting flexibility is the source of both the success of theoretical feminisms. It also makes them lack a broad-based credibility. Paradoxically, while in academia, feminist critique has never been so radical and pervading, feminism loses its progressive image in mainstream society. As early as 1991, Susan Faludi had argued that this *Backlash* was the result of a war against women raging in all parts, and at all levels of the American society. However, at no point of this best seller, has she investigated the possibility that feminists themselves may be causing it as well.[17] On the forefront of criticism, we deliver a myriad of self-centered close-ups that present a Picasso-like female creature. But they do not represent a female figure with whom most 'end users' of feminism could identify. Public representations are simpler but rarely more appealing. The site claiming it defines "feminism

for the new millenium" shows the following: their "passionate feminist" is self-centered and frustrated by purely individualistic issues such as money, the internet, sexuality and men, all of which leave little room, and even less time, for worries about the rest of her world.[18]

This myopic approach is not new: in 1952, De Beauvoir had already addressed narcissism and recognized it as a necessary step in a "well-defined process of identification." One is forced to adopt this attitude to first construct an ego for oneself and escape being just an object in society.[19] As women gained autonomy, ego-centered concerns progressively evolved into the collective movements of liberation via civil rights that marked the Sixties and Seventies. Fifty years after the *Second Sex*, a similarly legitimate need for narcissism resurfaced. The reason was the transformation that the concept of subject had undergone in the wake of Michel Foucault's work and the unexpected success of Derridean deconstruction - such as both were summarized on campuses across the USA. A series of new egos were made thinkable by cultural studies, valuable by multiculturalism, and accessible by a supportive political and economical climate. Hence the deployment we have witnessed in American Academia of the broadest gamut of feminist approaches ever.[20] Using a Deleuzian model, one can see how this emerging female subjectivism traced new lines of flight tending towards polymorphous issues, concerns, tones, practices etc. Mapping women's studies over all these vectors is taking feminism to undeniably uncharted *plateaus*. However, it also deterritorializes the common grounds where women previously sought to encounter each other. This displacement has not yet been followed by its usual reterritorialization. Individual stems of feminism are sprouting everywhere locally and fragmentarily. And they expand within fluctuating boundaries. Yet there no longer exists, even symbolically, a locus where we can rethink "locally but globally." A freedom "with delimited boundaries" is needed for all members of a second sex the majority of women still embody worldwide. Borrowing Deleuze

and Guattari's terminology, the original feminism proceeded from a "connective synthesis." It was gregarious, finding and lumping women together in the interest of a congregation. On the contrary, contemporary women's studies participate in a "disjunctive synthesis." This results from "self-reproducing cultural activities," and is directed toward "more or less utilitarian ends." It employs "a classification system of mutually exclusive identifications – nominal identities – and chooses only the ones judged suitable." Theoretically, such disjunction eventually leads to a new connective synthesis: an active reconnection to itself in order to actualize a new potential combination. It is this third phase, called "conjunctive synthesis," that women's studies should integrate into the curriculum. In this way, feminism can regain its operative value locally and increase its political impact internationally.[21]

Feminism is, by definition, a common project: it concerns one group made of one half of the globe's population. This collective dimension is structural as much as it is complementary to each particular case, it is also the source of a unique power we can have and desperately need. As the French philosopher and feminist Michèle Le Doeuff demonstrated in her study on women in philosophy, "what can resist the social practices that alienate all the "others" is no longer an intellectual effort but social movements, which are valuable not only because they articulate dissident ideas, but primarily because they represent a large mass and a high number."[22] Feminist discourses are currently failing to rally these masses because they emphasize the relevance of topical mechanisms of oppression but downgrade the merit of a collective encompassing of freedom. Although there exists a tension between both priorities, they are not mutually exclusive. By adapting within the scope of women's studies the concept of universality, we can redefine our collective feminist agenda in-between local striations. We can also rethink the idea of freedom across the sexual, social, cultural, and national borders that identity politics and multiculturalism have, paradoxically,

reinforced. The attempt is not without danger. In reassessing universality on the premise that, beyond their diversity, all women are still denied, albeit at various degrees, a liberty equal to men's, there is indeed a risk of reducing freedom, more or less deliberately, to occidental values. But without such universal dimension, there is no possibility for conjoint efforts to facilitate women's becoming-free beyond the thicker than ever line of "development." Since any analysis or gesture ventured by any member of occidental societies can be construed as a "relay in the distribution of ideas and practices pertaining to a capitalist socio-political culture," should Western feminists disengage from the rest of the world?[23]

Nussbaum's rational anchoring of the feminist debate in a defense of universal values offers a sound albeit controversial alternative: she proposes an archetypal bill of rights. Her gesture is all the more daring as it emerges from an unlikely combination of intellectual sources: a revitalized reading of Plato and Aristotle and resilient liberal principles she derives from John Stuart Mill or John Rawls interwoven in a dialectic interaction with some of the leading feminists mentioned earlier. Visually, to the strong but elusive femininity of current theories, Nussbaum opposes the fragile but enduring female body of an Indian agricultural worker that is quasi-mummified**.**

Her choosing to defend universal values confronts us with the similarly ageless question of purpose. In male dominated societies that, as far as I know, are the only societies that we

know so far, numerous forms of oppression ranging from the most blatant to the least tangible limit women's freedom. All must eventually be addressed but, considering the multiple issues that now fill various feminist agendas, it might be useful to add Pierce to Mills and Rawls. Confronting with pragmatic questions the relationship between feminist theory, women's studies and the practices of feminism as both intellectual and social *engagements* may reveal common priorities and interactive functions as well as clarify our goals to regain public support.

On top of the list of priorities is the problem of prioritizing because, for the outsider, it looks as though media-induced anorexia and famine, Victoria's Secret panty line and female genital mutilation, sexual harassment and forced prostitution, queer bashing and death by stoning have a similar impact on what cultural theorists call "the construction of feminine identity," and most women their sense of self. In university catalogs, such radically different issues are indeed juxtaposed under the patriarchal exactions summarized in courses descriptions, and neo-imperialism can appear on the same web page as elective surgery.[24] Do our students discriminate? Does the public know we know the difference? Can we still address *that* difference although we have proven that *difference* is a pretext for dominance? If we accept a part of responsibility in the confusion surrounding and undermining the cause that women's studies and feminism aim to serve, it is necessary to rethink how the theoretical debates that are written in academia translate outside of their walls. For a public that is increasingly sensitized to Manichean approaches, clarifying how overarching concepts such as value, better-being and collective freedom sustain particular issues may help "feminists redefine human rights abuses to include the degradation and violation of women" as well as differentiate public intolerance, commercial exploitation, and physical violence.[25] Such a meditation is timely. Ideologically, when in crisis, revolutionary theories tend to fade and

disappear, or to become dogmatic. At a time when the principle is losing credibility in the public arena, it is crucial that feminism did neither. The former would be a humanitarian catastrophe and the latter a reinforcement of the very power structures we set out to dismantle in the first place. On a historical level, this century is tragically inaugurated by manufactured enmities, masterminded aggressions, and opportunistic wars. It is also precipitating us all in what is called "globalization" when it indeed means a 'capitalization' of the globe. All of these only further the gender gap; it is therefore urgent to reassess our commitment both locally and internationally. Finally, there is a political imperative to redefining the kind of freedom we are demanding for women. On the social surface multiculturalism, political correctness, relativist thinking apparently dominated the intellectual debates of the last two decades and have, in spite of the excesses concomitant to emerging theories, resulted in numerous positive changes. However, deeper in the power fabric, neo-conservative thinkers were silently, but efficiently, gaining control of most sources of mass information needed to promote, or used to jeopardize, culturally progressive platforms.[26] It is thus particularly difficult, in this climate, to defend thinking in terms of global goals since conservative rhetoric traditionally relies on universal postulates. Yet, articulations of specific liberations also imply a tacitly understood liberty, since they denounce a lack of it. If we gave the question of freedom an answer that can be cross-cultural as well, we could connect the points common in women's studies in the USA, feminism as activism worldwide, and women's rights. The objective would be to form an assemblage able to adjust to the multiple facets inequality on the basis of gender presents in each context. This should unfold a plural yet shared space where to present a unified front, provide a purpose whose value is undeniable across most sections of our society, and reterritorialize female agency worldwide as a rhizomic network of particular becomings.[27]

It is such a paradigm shift that Nussbaum's model allows. Her objective is to put the local/particular feminist research and power to the service of women's freedom on a global scale. The supra-national dimension of Nussbaum's project is part of a form of humanism articulated out of her work on Greek thought she defines as "a compassionate philosophy - a philosophy that exists for the sake of human beings, in order to address their deepest needs, confront their most urgent perplexities, and bring them from misery to some greater measure of flourishing."[28] Clearly, Nussbaum intends to incorporate the practical and caring aspects she sees in Hellenistic wisdom and the altruism she traces in liberal thinkers to her own function as a philosopher and her role as an active feminist. Inclusive of all these, the model she presented during her conference at Wayne State University is called the "Capabilities Approach."[29] Destined for international agencies, such as the United Nations or other non-governmental human rights organizations, as a basis to assess the specificity of feminine needs and address them in their difference, she proposed a rational and cross-boundary tool. The purpose is to evaluate the concrete possibilities offered to women regardless of their social context, and cultural foundations. The assumptions are that the concepts of choice and rights are linked, and foster a form of freedom that is desirable for human beings in all societies. As the term 'capability' indicates, these rights are a matter of possibility, not obligation: it is up to each individual to enjoy them or not, but they should universally be granted equally.[30] The explicit postulate constitutive of this approach is that human beings have core fundamental rights that transcend all cultural borders – nation, race, class, gender etc. One can also deduce, although it is implicit, that no liberation is possible without these vital capabilities being guaranteed. They form an extremely simple list. The Central Human Functional Capabilities include: Life; Bodily Health; Bodily Integrity; Senses, Imagination, and Thought; Emotions; Practical Reason; Affiliation; Other Species; Play; Control over

one's Environment.[31] Despite a common sense that used to be self-evident, the principle underwritten, that freedom has a universal foundation, is anachronistic and bound to raise numerous objections.

This list assumes that all human beings equally value the same things, namely life, affiliation, sexual freedom etc. This is a hypothesis philosophers would probably still make, considering the breadth Nussbaum gives to her definitions, but it is a principle rightfully suspicious to recent generations of feminists. It is also a claim flatly denied by many multiculturalists. In terms of the capabilities themselves, the list might become normative. Spelling out such common sense capabilities can be construed as a dictate on women instead of a demand on governments, a biased reduction of their subjectivity and not a minimal delineation of the fundamental functions that characterize a free human life. Such an interpretative rupture is quasi-systematic in the younger generations of feminists. It may be explained by their loyalty to a particular group superceding a sense of a common bond or the anxiety and resentment that fill people asked to take a stance about "values" these days. It could also result from an ignorance of the complex network of philosophical sources, references, analysis that ethically substantiate "evolving theories of justice and the human good."[32] Although many of them are mostly ignorant of such dimensions, students in women's studies have been made aware that - as Nussbaum acknowledges - "Much of what philosophers of the past (in all traditions) have written about women, sex, and the family has not shown such understanding [of women's experience of subordination and exclusion]."[33] However, they do not have the necessary background to nuance, question, much less challenge and partake in an often reductive condemnation of western canonic philosophy. There is therefore an inadequacy between the underlying ethical stakes that sustain both women's studies and feminism - freedom, justice, value, subjectivity, agency, power - and the

tools with which average students are equipped. Few conceive of them in terms of philosophical issues that have been debated for centuries, and reach far beyond local and trendy preoccupations - gender stereotypes, identity, equality, sexuality, economy etc.[34]

The universal capabilities project presents also more generally problematic aspects: its national source first. Although it is inspired and documented by numerous international cases and examples, Nussbaum's feminist bill of rights originates in a society known worldwide to consider its priorities as international standards. A definition of rights, and its associated "freedom," coming from the United States often encounters a knee-jerk reaction internationally - regardless of its content.[35] Secondly, its intellectual framing is questionable: the conjunction of ethical continental thought with cultural studies could be perceived as a reappropriation of women's capabilities by the discourses of law or philosophy that had previously established a monopoly on the concepts of right and freedom. Practical issues should be also raised: how feasible will it be to have local women's groups review and adapt this list so it can be co-opted and reprioritized? How reasonable is it anyway to encapsulate basic rights for an entire gender in ten paragraphs? Furthermore, how valid is a list elaborated by a Law Professor? Nussbaum's knowledge and influential position authorize her to conceive and promote an ethical project of that scale. Her research, however, as extensive as it clearly is despite her Socratic recognition of its limits, may never seem sufficient to qualify Nussbaum to articulate the feminine condition beyond the exclusive and inherently privileged structures that enable her to do it in the first place. Should we abandon the possibility that all women may benefit from a standardized reference on minimal rights then? Or can such an inscription of freedom, as imperfect as it may be, still sustain the case-by-case analysis that is needed on a global scale? To address the humanitarian urgency and the physical needs that prompted Nussbaum's initiative, there must indeed be an agreement on what constitutes

freedom for women as a gender. It is not only an identity component that is independent from one's society, regardless of how each one shapes it, but also *de facto* the most universal basis on which one group dominates the other. Once enunciated, no violation to such core definition should be tolerated, nor freedom limited for any woman anywhere for cultural, social, religious, political etc. reasons. Otherwise, the whole premise of feminism, namely that women are always denied liberties because they are women but under pretexts such as culture, religion, power politics etc., would be invalidated. Not only is the question of freedom, therefore, central to the study of women, it is also at the heart of a community that presents itself as an amalgamation of numerous heterogeneous and various irreconcilable entities. Answering it will determine the facets we want feminism to present in the decades to come, provided we decide that feminism should have a future.

Under the shadows of colonialism, the threat of ethnocentrism, and the guilt of Occidentalism, early feminism has been restricted, in the last thirty years, within increasingly precise national, social, cultural etc. borders. As paradoxical as it appeared amidst a rhetoric dominated by cross- and trans- prefixes, feminist issues were relocated to narrow areas. International concerns were often displaced abroad or onto the 'transnational' faculty in universities, to be dealt with primarily by feminists coming from non-western cultures. Learning from these representatives' direct experience, unmediated insight and specialized critique was crucial, but occidental thinkers got somehow unburdened of or banned from the grueling task of reassessing intellectuals' active role in the world. With the advent of women's studies, the universal feminist paradigm had shifted from a principle behind which all women could rally regardless of their class, culture, origin, faith (as members of one group oppressed universally) to a placeholder within which every woman could articulate herself. But in the individuality of her cultural identity, she could no longer participate in a planetary struggle

ninety-nine percent of which would not concern her, half of which she could be perpetuating anyway.[36]

This position still seems common today. What post-modernism *right*fully showed us, namely that *wrong* rights were imposed on the world in the name of progress, salvation, liberation, has been radicalized into a systematic denial that there might be *right* rights.[37] The negative reaction of women's studies students to Nussbaum's list comes from an uncritical belief that each culture is to be judged only by its own internal norms.[38] The problem with this postulate is that it is both sensible and absurd, safe but paralyzing, pacifying yet deadly. Cultural relativism aims at fostering the differences in self-definition of one's freedom, this does not have to exclude a universal definition of freedom in the name of difference. When we are confronted by oppression outside our cultural bubble – provided there is such a unified sphere -, and ask for governmental intervention or offer help as a citizen or compassion as a human being, we superimpose by default a universal definition of freedom (our own) onto nationally defined rights. This implies recognizing oppression as an absolute [un]value, so to speak, and having the courage to claim that, be they ritual or episodic, occidental or non-western, religious or secular, certain practices are barbaric.[39] It took the occident hundreds of years to come out of its dark ages and stop burning witches, torturing bodies in the middle of the market place, enslaving people of African descent or raping servants.[40] Few people today would deny that these then ritualized practices - although they had a long and well established tradition - were not barbaric. Our being hesitant to consider them as such comes from a misinterpretation of the concept of ethnocentrism. When Lévi-Strauss revitalized the term, he specified that the tendency to consider "barbaric" other people was universal: the very primitive tribes occidentals considered to be barbaric had their own barbarians. Today ethnocentrism is often understood as an occidental trait, and "barbaric" as used to ostracize

non-western-cultures. In fact, it implies an ethic judgment: barbaric is every culture's "other" as it deems it mean or bad. All cultures have a sense of their neighbor's barbary; they might simply have different rhythms to come to grips with their own.[41] Is it therefore thinkable that cultures as an amalgam have practices that are not acceptable and should be condemned? Or is it only the case for Western societies? Should we stop fighting oppression or cruelty beyond our cultural realm on the premise that violence, torture, mutilation and arbitrary death sentences are not barbaric rituals when and because they are outside our borders? Should the associations that try to protect human rights, such as UNIFEM or UNESCO for instance, be dismantled?[42] It is impossible to answer any of these questions without a delineation of rights and a common definition of freedom. The principle of such definition is tacitly accepted when it applies to human rights, yet it becomes highly controversial when only women are concerned, as it challenges the political structures in place to perpetuate patriarchy on a global scale. Taken literally, multiculturalism may reinforce these structures: if feminists refuse to define what constitutes freedom for women regardless of their cultural background, what they signify to the public is that

- We implicitly agree that certain bodies are less valuable in some societies and thus 'rightfully' controlled or disposed of, the very principle by which sexism and racism are justified,
- We recognize that advocating for others anything we find good for ourselves partakes of the inherently hegemonic agenda of feminism as rooted in the West,
- We deprive ourselves not only of the right to act outside of our own cultural circle but also of the means to clearly delimit the circumference of our empathic competence,
- We refuse non-Western women the help we grant our own who lack means of expression, are silenced, traumatized, threatened: namely a voice they could find in

collective networks of support (association, shelters, representation) and the articulation of their plight by an external agency.

Shying away from a charter of universal rights, academic feminists appear to be in contradiction: we demand that Western women be empowered by any and all means, so they can articulate their needs, theorize their desires and practice their beliefs. However, we should tolerate that women elsewhere be denied any of these means, including the most basic ones such as the right to eat, move or read.[43] Are these 'others' expected not to need any of the intellectual and physical tools we have fought to acquire so that women can at least be given the chance to conceive of themselves as free agents? Such paradoxical questions are multiplying, and generating innovative debates, but they are leading our students into a dead-end. They may also normalize a dangerous status quo there, for fear of normalizing what we call progress here. Yet, in this *no-exit* situation, the door is not locked: we can choose to get out.

The feminine condition confronts us with our responsibilities towards members that are still human beings, albeit cultural products. What is also at stake in the question of women's freedom, unless we deny they have any common denominators, is a reassessment of humanistic principles beyond post-modernity and in parallel to multiculturalism. Female bodies suffer uselessly everywhere. Girls' minds are shut and women's will are crushed all the time. As feminists, we have unveiled sexist mechanisms against a gender in our own societies. Should we accept them elsewhere like harmless cultures' variations among their members? If we tolerate for others an oppression we condemn on ourselves, by calling it tradition, religious principle, or simply a *fait de société*, we forsake the basic humanist values that, in indirect but numerous ways, allowed the advent of feminism and led to our own freedom:

- the vital need for education in the development of children that numerous pedagogical treatises emphasized often against scholastic dogmatism,[44]
- the trust in such education as the promoter of good-will, tolerance, ethical conduct, social responsibility,
- the affirmation of human freedom and independence of mind that led to a free examination of religious texts and the conviction that each individual should evaluate ideologies, dogmas, principles, traditions, rules and not only accept them out of faith,
- a belief in critical reason and a commitment to resort to it when dealing with human questions or cognitive problems, instead of relying on faith and mysticism, or accepting that such interrogations may be forbidden to us,
- the primary concern for human development, personal growth, private fulfillment as well as improvement of humankind as a whole,[45]
- the conviction that peace can only be achieved if political powers of all kinds are balanced and shared by a greater number,
- an overall commitment to protecting life.

If we deny that coercion has universal forms and refuse to see it, in certain cultures, because they are not founded on these principles, we should indeed renounce them for fear of "enjoying the monopoly of moral good."[46] We must also let go of reason. If we justify any violation to our core freedom on a cultural basis because, "from a multiculturalist perspective the liberal view of life is culturally specific and neither self-evident nor the only rational or true way to organize human life", we must accept all oppression as soon as it claims a cultural basis.[47] The holocaust and the Ku Klux Klan, for instance, can be argued to be necessary components of the Aryan culture. Although one must be out of one's mind to defend either of them, they are indeed rational, in their own ways of reorganizing human life – be it by

suppressing it. If we can condemn Nazi Germany because it was occidental racism, or because men were also victimized, but declare ourselves incompetent to judge gender cleansing beyond the borders in which post-modernity was born but claims to have transgressed, we not only deconstruct the very concept of freedom, we destroy our own credibility.[48] We also give up the worldview opened by humanism, as well as any control over a globalization post-modernity heralded, precipitated, and fostered although it is architectured by the various agents of power it denounces. What we say ultimately is that barbary such as female mutilation is acceptable if it is rooted in centuries of non-occidental tradition, but not if, as in the concentration camps, it results from a decade of historical aberration in the West. What we do is renounce reason, because who could rationally measure the period - more than five years, less than three centuries, over a millennium...? - during which violence must be exerted for it to stop being a violation acceptable provided it happens elsewhere? How much time is needed for oppression to be endowed with some higher meaning, or become the signifier of a culture's independence from Western bourgeois liberal supremacy? Is pointing to coercion and oppression always "encouraging young women to repudiate the integrity and cohesion of their own minority culture?"[49] Should our students think of themselves as repudiating their own culture when they engage in a critical rethinking about it and refuse to perpetuate some of the aspects that are excluding women because these have, so far, insured their culture's "integrity and cohesion?" Wanting to stop female genital mutilation, liberalize control over one's reproductive body, allow alternatives to gender specific clothes when they practically function as prisons, suppress death by stoning, support sexual harassment laws, eliminate feet binding, do not have to repudiate entire cultures, they are ways of confronting them with some of their more or less repressive components. Cultures, like religions, laws, governments or principles, are not abstract self-generated entities that should be respected at

all cost and contemplated with awe: they are dynamic processes suffered as well as generated and transformed by people.[50] They belong to people and they change: even when erected as a trunk of most fundamentalist principles, it can be sheer coercive power, and it always includes a rhizome network of progressive forces, that are no lesser part of it. Differentiating between them is crucial in terms of women's freedom. If we do not reframe some of our post-modern individualist preoccupations within a collective humanist vision of a basic good, we may fail to see that the point of feminism today is less the study of women than their rescue. As a gender, our freedom is jeopardized by increasingly more fundamentalist currents as well as by our own educated precautions, increasing timidity or accommodating cowardice. The challenge lies ahead of us, at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid and outside our borders. Nussbaum's "compassionate imagining of another person's suffering" as she puts it, is necessary not only at an individual level. Also, as a community, we must decide to believe in a common becoming of the female gender or admit that we condone, as silent witnesses, practices that we should label 'gendercidal' if they happened to the girls next door.[51] Without the concept of a common *humanitas,* we cannot combat them. Etymologically, the term links all of our destinies, but historically it designated man's ability to refine his education, and his capacity for kindness. *Humanitas* was opposed by the Romans to *virtus,* the fundamentally male principle of courage or energy. *Humanitas* is, in this sense, what is female in humans. Its philosophical implication, humanism, the movement that rallies, beyond disciplines, countries and cultures, all minds in search of a better humanity, is indeed at the core of the same Western-Occidental Modernity that justified conquest, prospered thanks to colonialism, imposed itself as dominant, still sees itself as central. But modernity is not a monolith. Demanding that rights to food and health care be equal for both genders of any given society may be, according to the prevailing theory at this point, part of the "alleged policy of

exploitation of backward or weak peoples by a large power" as colonialism is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary.[52] Stopping to do it is certainly part of their real starvation and precarious condition. Moreover, that freedom is linked to the value of education, the power of reason, the possibility of personal improvement, the ability to think for oneself, the right to participate in one's community is a humanist claim but not a tenet of Occidentalism only. Anybody in power anywhere values this type of freedom, be it only for himself, even if he declares it illegal, heretic, religiously taboo or unnecessary for / undesired by others... Arguments showing that the women that are deprived of such freedom may not even desire it in certain cultures would only be sustainable if freedom was valued by none of these societies' members. Why would the members of one group enjoy certain liberties, and the entire other one be indifferent to them? And why would such a lack of interest systematically be found among women? Even if women themselves approve of their oppression, we should still strive to build structures that allow the freedom not to do so: one of the signs of abuse is its victim's denying it.

Does this mean that feminists should fight for the abolishing of practices in cultures that are not theirs and that women perpetuate? Julia Kristeva wrote in *Le Temps des Femmes* that Feminism has three stages:

- Request for women's equality,
- Claim of a difference between genders,
- Renouncement to collective struggle to focus on individually conducted research.[53]

She was right and wrong. The first three stages unfolded as planned, but there is a need for a fourth one:

- Reaffirming the universality of the right to freedom from hunger, terror, despair, violence, illiteracy, helplessness, oppression, repression, deprivation, humiliation, degradation, pain.

In the West, we have gone through and recorded the three stages. This is not to say that all women are free in a similar way yet, but all of them have some form of access, in our society, to sources that enable them to seek such freedom, if they so wish. On the contrary, numerous societies still prevent women from even conceiving of the first stage. This is what we, as feminists, must strive at changing. Doing it through agencies such as the United Nations, or projects such as the Universal Ethics one, will indeed mean take a stance against practices that we judge as maintaining women's inequality according to our criteria.[54] Such denunciations should be refined by cultural studies perspectives as well as define a revisited humanism and aim at increasing their "capabilities" by insuring that vital functions for women are similar to men's.

Addressing the question of women's freedom therefore implies a consensual definition of the basic rights that will insure it. It also imply the reaffirmation that freedom for all is not synonymous of absolute freedom. Claiming an equality of rights for women may involve demanding that privileges be taken away from men, asking that practices be abolished from cultures. Consequently, although a prolegomenon, this question of freedom points to a formulation of ethics that does not call on a system of moral rules and obligations. It interpellates our judgment on the abilities and capacities women can claim for and grant to themselves and each other. Nussbaum's list is a good start for feminists to answer it. Beyond our studies of individual women, we can further decline liberty in the feminine to prevent feminism from declining further. If we still believe that freedom starts with choice, the fourth and next stage of feminism should be one of reintegrated humanists and feminists relentlessly

working at defining trans-cultural common values in the context of diversity. Without it, post-modernity, an invention just as fundamentally male as humanism, will have managed to divide (to better reign?) women. We may end up seeing, in our own, yet more "others" and potential enemies.[55] Irony or tragedy? On the question of Freedom, one can also say:

> To conclude, an enabling critique of development must engage in a cultural challenge to this inherited discourse of patriarchy, caste and other inequities justified by traditional cosmologies. And that challenge cannot proceed within the confines of local knowledges alone, for these knowledges simultaneously allow everyday resistance but also condition the subaltern to accept their subordination. It is important to acknowledge that, like all cultures, non-Western cultures have progressive impulses toward autonomy and justice. But if we let traditions define what autonomy and justice are, that is, if we accept that different cultures have different norms of what is true, just and good, we run the risk of an easy appropriation by traditional patriarchs who are taking the lead in the rising tide of religious revivalism in many parts of the world. The task of feminism and other progressive social movements ought to be to challenge the subalterns to see through the mystification of their own inherited ideologies. (Meera Nanda, *Do the marginalized valorize the margins?*)[56]

Without a cross-cultural universal ethics to claim, practice and sustain an educated solidarity, our own liberation will have been useless if we have to stop bringing our gender closer to freedom.[57]

Central Human Functional Capabilities

1. Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length, not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.

2. Bodily Health. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

3. Bodily Integrity. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason — and to do these things in a 'truly human' way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences, and to avoid non-necessary pain.

5. Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to

experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)

6. Practical Reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience.)

7. Affiliation. (a) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.) (b) Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails protections against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, caste, ethnicity or national origin.

8. Other Species. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. Play. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. Control over one's Environment. (a) Political Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. (b) Material Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods); having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

Sex and Social Justice, Chapter 1, 41-42.

[1] René Descartes, *Lettre au Père Mesland, 9 février 1645*, vol. 3 of *Œuvres philosophiques*, (Paris: Garnier, 1989) 551-2. "[...] bien dans une plus grande facilité de se déterminer, ou bien dans un plus grand usage de cette puissance positive que nous avons de suivre le pire, tout en voyant le meilleur. [...] Mais la liberté consiste dans la seule facilité d'exécution, et alors, libre, spontané et volontaire ne sont qu'une même chose."

[2] I define feminist *engagement* as the inverse of Braidotti's definition of feminist thought: "the movement that makes sexual difference operative, through the strategy of fighting for the social equality of the sexes." Rosi Braidotti, "Toward a New Nomadism: Feminist Deleuzian Tracks; or, Metaphysics and Metabolism," in *Gilles Deleuze and The Theater of Philosophy*, eds. Constantin V. Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Routledge, 1994), 160.

[3] Martha Nussbaum teaches Philosophy, Classics, Comparative Literature, Law and Ethics.

[4] Cultural identity results from a combination of multiple factors such as race, ethnic origin, class, sexual orientation, political conviction, and religious beliefs. Personal characteristics or choices are also potential components (age, weight, food preferences etc.).

[5] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Feminist Internationalism: A defense of Universal Values" (paper presented at the First Annual Seymour Riklin Memorial Lecture, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mi., January 15, 1999.

[6] Marnia Lazreg, "Development: Feminist Theory's Cul de Sac," in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post-Colonialism and Representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London: Zed Books, 2002), 128.

[7] "The modernist project is understood, firstly, in terms of the complicity of reason, truth, and progress with domination and, secondly, as the marriage of the individual will with the

concept of capital." Rosi Braidotti, "Toward a New Nomadism: Feminist Deleuzian Tracks; or, Metaphysics and Metabolism," in *Gilles Deleuze and The Theater of Philosophy*, eds. Constantin V. Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Routledge, 1994), 159. Hence post-modernism condemning reason, truth and progress along with its postulating its own self-determination in regards to capitalist ideology.

[8] The life, works and writings of Abigail Adams, Mercy Ottis Warrens, Mother Elizabeth Bayley Setton and Simone de Beauvoir best exemplify humanistic feminism.

[9] See the historical landmarks of first wave feminism in Sheila Ruth, "Rediscovering American Women: A Chronology highlighting women's history in the United States and Update – The process continues" in *Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, (Mayfield: California, 1990) 431-443.

[10] A basic on-line search presents the following taxonomy: Aesthetic and Art, Cultural Anthropology, Body Studies, Communication and Media, Critical Theory, Economics, Education, Environment, Epistemology, Ethics, History, Geography, Law, Lesbian Issues, Liberal Feminism, Literary Criticism, Multi-Culturalism, Philosophy, Political Theory, Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism, Psychology/Psychoanalysis, Radical Feminism, Religion/Spirituality, Science, Sexuality, Political Sciences; available from http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/enin.html; INTERNET.

[11] Marnia Lazreg, "Development: Feminist Theory's Cul de Sac," in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post-Colonialism and Representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London: Zed Books, 2002), 123.

[12] In our society, such limits are set by a societal relative tolerance for spousal abuse, rape, wage differences, lack of parental assistance etc. Similar impediments are found throughout

the world although they appear trivial in comparison with the other hardships to which women can be confronted in Third World countries.

[13] A comparable view is discernable in Marnia Lazreg's stern assessment of the limitations of postmodernist theory entitled "Development: Feminist Theory's Cul de Sac," in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post-Colonialism and Representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London: Zed Books, 2002), 123-145.

[14] The effect of of such mediatic reduction is seen in Rush Limbaugh's lasting "feminazi" formula.

[15] One of the most despicable examples of defamation can be found on Jim Kalb, "Feminism and Antifeminism" available from http://libercratic.government.directnic.com/Journal/social/fems/Anti-Feminist.htm; INTERNET.

[16] The Center for Communications Program at Johns Hopkins has created a site to post on line various sorts of documents, available from http://www.endvaw.org/; INTERNET. Reports, articles, legal texts, policies, radio interviews, etc. are provided to help anyone in their attempts to end violence against women. Such initiatives are a particularly successful example of theory and groundwork interaction.

[17] In fact, it might be argued that I am blind to, and thus perpetuate, the blame that is unavoidably put on women when I advocate we should take some of it.

[18] Visit the 3rd WWWave available from http://www.io.com/~wwwave/; INTERNET.

[19] Simone de Beauvoir, "Justifications: The Narcissist," pt. 6 of *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 629.

[20] A basic but not complete list would consist in Catharine McKinnon to Camille Paglia, via Butler, Wolf, Nye, Hoff Sommers, Faludi, Jardine, Dworkin, Braidotti, Moller Okin, Friedan, Harraway, Bordo, Mc Elroy to name a few of the particularly influential theorists during that period. I am not mentioning the prominent feminists from different cultural origins - such as bell hooks or Gayatri Spivak for instance - as I believe their role in forging a new image of feminism is closely connected to the specificity of each of their individual backgrounds. In this essay, moreover, it is feminism as founded on the western definition of freedom that is in question.

[21] The concepts of connective, disjunctive and conjunctive syntheses are defined in the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Psychanalyse et Familialisme," chap. 8 in *L'Anti-Œdipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1972) 80-125. For a summary of their theory, refer to Brian Massumi, *A user's guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 49-50. The text in quotation marks is taken from these pages.

[22] Michèle Le Doeuff, *L'étude et le rouet* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 238. "Ce qui peut tenir tête aux pratiques sociales qui aliènent tous les «autres» n'est plus un seul effort intellectuel, mais des mouvements sociaux, lesquels ne valent pas seulement par leur capacité à articuler des idées contestatrices, mais, au premier chef, par leur poids et leur nombre."

[23] Marnia Lazreg, "Development: Feminist Theory's Cul de Sac," in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post-Colonialism and Representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London: Zed Books, 2002), 135.

[24] A typical example is available from http://www.nau.edu/~wst/access/bigcd/course.html#wst291; INTERNET.

[25] Speech by Charlotte Bunch on Women's Rights at the United Nations in 1993, quoted in Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) defines violence against women as:

"Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." Refer to Niamh Reilly, "Violence against women," on the Women's Human Rights.net, available from http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-VAW.html; INTERNET.

[26] This points to the network of connections between the teachings of Albert Wohlstetter and Leo Strauss and disciples such as Allan Bloom, with prominent political advisors like Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, John Aschcroft, or organizations such as the American Enterprise Institute, Fox News, the Wall Street Journal, The Weekly Standard etc.

[27] See chapter 10 in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[28] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Presses, 1994), 3.

[29] Starting in 1986 and for eight years, Nussbaum worked as a research advisor for the World Institute for Development Economics Research in Helsinki, "an institute of the United Nations University." Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xv.

[30] As I understand it, in the case of reproductive rights for instance, furthering women's equal freedom would mean making illegal punishment for abstinence, allowing the

distribution of contraceptive means and providing access to abortion, notwithstanding what most women of a given culture would actually decide to use. The point is to insure their ability to choose, even if women chose to exercise none. This would constitute the cap-ability that is refused to them at the present time.

[31] Refer to the complete definitions at the end of this text or in Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41.

[32] The development of Nussbaum's agenda can be traced through *Cultivating Humanity, Sex and Social Justice*, and *Women and Human Development*, as well as in Susan Moller Okin's collection of essays: *Is Multiculturalism bad for women*? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[33] Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 301.

[34] Surprisingly, students are often surprised to hear that homosexual, ethnic, religious, colonial, minority discourses have not been invented by the twentieth century - some being apologetic for centuries. I happen to have taught undergraduate and graduate courses on critical theory and feminism at the University of California Riverside and Wayne State University, both institutions Nussbaum cites as case studies for her defense of reform in liberal education. Very few of my students - if any - had read Plato, knew anything about Kant, Mills or Rawls, could define liberalism, had heard of stoicism, or believed Diderot spoke against racism, but they could all associate the oppression of women and minorities with the very Western philosophy they had not read. This is understandable: it takes years to study and comprehend the kind of corpus that not only sustains but illuminates and validates Nussbaum's project. Within the constraints of the American university system, few students

would have the financial means to dedicate such a time, provided they were more actively encouraged, or had the energy to do so after their part or full time job. Moreover, dealing with articles and short, current material is a lot more appealing to grade-oriented students than reading thousands of 'canonic' pages.

[35] Larry L. Langford, "Postmodernism and Enlightenment, Or, Why not a Fascist Aesthetics?" *SubStance* 67 (1992): 24-43.

[36] At the very same time as Nussbaum publicized her defense, a petition was circulating on the web. From Brandeis University and dozens of campuses in France, Germany, Switzerland, Israel, England a text describing the condition of women in Afghanistan was being sent by one friend to another. The purpose was to gather enough signatures to convince the American government to act against the Taliban's cruelty that had been denounced in Academic circles for quite some time. The tragedy endured by Afghani women was undeniable, but without the possibility of defining rights rationally, without the courage to affirm the value of freedom such as our tradition defines it, not much could be done about their plight. At the time, fully aware of the dilemma, the authors of the petition had felt obligated to include a disclaimer at the end of their request for signatures. They specified that the Afghani culture as a whole was not an aberration, and that they were targeting only a very dangerous form of extremist fundamentalism. The addendum was clearly intended to address the contradictory feelings these feminist academics knew their request might generate: how could we, as women, sign the petition when we, as theorists, were widely advocating cultural relativism. Any reference to fundamentalism was suspicious of ethnocentric demonizing of another culture. Hence a disclaimer that sounded like an apology.

[37] The involuntary Straussian undertones of such a claim poses an even more general ethical problem: can one still defend a principle while recognizing the danger of some of its applications? The answer must be a careful yes, or else we would have to condemn, for example, the entire Christian tradition because of the inquisition or pharmaceutical companies that produce antibiotics as well as substances used in various deadly ways.

[38] Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 120-21.

[39] For the opposite view refer to Sander L. Gilman's article, “Barbaric Rituals” in Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism bad for women?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 53-58. Gilman's argument is triply flawed though. The first problem lies in the not insignificant fact that Gilman discards the Barbary of what he incorrectly calls female 'circumcision' on the basis of a long comparison with the male body and physiology of pleasure. Secondly, this article criticizes women for speaking for all women, yet ignores or denies any voice to the massive protest against female genital mutilation organized within the countries where it is most commonly practiced, despite being often illegal. Although they are not Western, bourgeois and even less "white," millions of women do indeed consider the "ritual" superstitious and do define it as barbaric. Which it undeniably is, since this mutilation results not only in deprivation of a sexual pleasure Gilman qualifies as "simple" stimuli, but also in infections, diminished health and increased death rates. This is an aspect of the "ritual" that is hardly a "projection of the Western, bourgeois notions" of anything on anyone. It is a statistical reality that Gilman dismisses because Enlightenment gentiles previously used the "infections and deaths" threat as arguments against Jewish circumcision. The third major flaw here is that some infections and deaths may be mythical and claimed out of undeniably

unacceptable anti-Semitism, while others may be real and claimed out of compassion, a distinction Gilman is not willing to make. His avoidance is logical: such subtlety is precisely what validates the position of Okin, Tamir and Nussbaum whose defense of basic liberties and bodily integrity are reduced, in this article, to "tropes about the psychopathology of those who circumcise and are circumcised."

[40] See Michel Foucault's description of public rituals of torture in his famous text *Discipline and Punish,* as well as his lifelong analysis of all insidious forms of control.

[41] In Saudi Arabia, public executions are still practiced. Murder, rape, apostasy, and drug trafficking are punished by decapitation. Thieves or adulterous women are amputated of an arm or a leg. The main executioner, presently Muhammad Saad Al-Beshi, is given a sabre to decapitate women as they still wear their hijab. A knife is used to sever members at different articulations, "depending on the judge's orders. Information gathered from Alexandre Lévy, "La vie sans histoire du bourreau en chef du royaume saoudien," *Le Monde,* 16 June 2003. Archive available from www.Lemonde.fr; INTERNET.

[42] There seems to be no possibility left to help since most such organizations are linked to Western nations. See for instance arguments that connect dots between feminists asking for reproductive rights and family planning in Africa and racism. It would be embedded in contraceptive technologies devised to insure the control of resources by Eurocentric or North American organizations. Presented as "rhetoric on the reduction of fertility rates," Western feminists' advocating the right to birth control would be consolidating the mechanisms of Western hegemony over the world economy via a scientific monitoring of people deemed incapable of controlling their bodies. Refer to Esther Wangari, "Reproductive Technologies: A Third World Feminist Perspective" in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking*

Modernity, Post-Colonialism and Representation, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London: Zed Books, 2002), 298-312.

[43] Consult the Women's Human Rights Net page, available from http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-VAW.html; INTERNET.

44 In France, thinkers like Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne led to the creation of alternative institutions of higher learning such as the Collège des Lecteurs Royaux. Future prestigious Collège de France, it challenged the omnipotence of the medieval Aristotelian citadel of the Sorbonne, and paved the way to laicization and thus democratization of education.

[45] Michel Foucault's work is key to identifying the various forms of power that discipline and punish bodies in general, while Deleuze's concept of Becoming-[Woman] may help contemplate femininity beyond cultural differences.

[46] Bhikhu Parekh, "A varied moral world," in *Is Multiculturalism bad for women?*, ed. Susan Moller Okin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 74.

[47] Bhikhu Parekh, "A varied moral world" in *Is Multiculturalism bad for women?*, ed. Susan Moller Okin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 74.

[48] What I call gendercidal practices include: domestic violence as potentially fatal, death for dowry issues, sex selective abortion, female infanticide, AIDS due to sexual trafficking and forced drug addiction, lack of access to medical care, diseases generated by unnecessary bodily harm etc.

[49] Abdullahi An-Na-Im, "Promises we should all keep in Common Cause" in *Is Multiculturalism bad for women?*, ed. Susan Moller Okin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 59.

[50] A particularly revealing example of the complexity of cultural mechanisms of oppression can be currently found in France. There has been a five-year long discussion between the government and professors throughout the country about the consequences of Muslim girls wearing their veil (hijab) in schools. One of the main arguments, given in favor of this anti-constitutional gesture, is that the number of young women wearing it is increasing every year. At first interpreted as a revival of religious fervor and pride in one's cultural origin that one might contemplate respecting at the cost of the laws of the country, this recrudescence is now also explained by a radically different reason. A recent group of young Muslim women from poor suburbs demonstrating on the theme "*Ni putes, ni soumises*" (Neither whores, nor submissive) revealed that many of them are forced to wear the veil for fear of being aggressed by the male population of their residences and districts. Islamic conservative leaders are recruiting young Muslim men by advocating fundamentalist principles they demand be enforced. Their mothers, as mostly first or second generation immigrants, were given a choice when integrating in the French secular French society. However, numerous teenagers are harassed today by male relatives, friends or even strangers if they do not wear their veil. One of them, Sohane, was indeed set on fire in a public dumpster and killed by her boyfriend. Which aspects of which culture should be considered in such a case to define women's freedom?

[51] Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 328.

[52] George P. Landow, "The Metaphorical use of Colonialism and Related Terms - Political Discourse," available from http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/poldiscourse/colony2.html; INTERNET

[53] Julia Kristeva, *Women's Time*, trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, no. 7 (fall 1981): 1, 13-35.

[54] The Universal Ethics Project was started in the spring of 1997 and gathered twelve prominent philosophers, theologians and ethicists around an initiative of the UNESCO Division of Philosophy and Ethics. The purpose was to discuss the possible conceptual foundations for a cross-cultural, universal ethics and reflect on "those values and principles that are widely acknowledged and/or rationally necessary for human survival and well-being." Available from www.unesco.org/opi2/philosophyandethics/intro.htm; INTERNET

[55] Jean-François Lyotard, in his 1979 *Postmodern Condition*, first made the term famous although Arnold Toynbee would have coined it as early as 1940. Aside from his, the names most commonly encountered in association with post-modern theory are Baudrillard, Debord, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Jameson, Latour, Said and Fish. Few women appear on overview pages (Susan Sontag occasionally does). Refer, for instance to the University of Colorado page on Contemporary Philosophy, Critical Theory and Post-Modern thought available from http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/postmodern.html; INTERNET.

[56] Meera Nanda, "Do the marginalized valorize the margins?" in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post-Colonialism and Representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London: Zed Books, 2002), 223.

[57] "However, further advancement on the issue of violence against women is being threatened by the wider backlash at work against the women's rights as human rights movement, generally involving alliances among conservative forces -- North and South. Most recently, progress was hindered at the March 2003 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The delegate from Iran, with support from Egypt, objected to the inclusion

of a paragraph that called on governments to condemn violence against women and refrain from invoking any custom, tradition, or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women." Niamh Reilly, "Violence against women," on Women's Human Rights.net, [revised April 2003]. Available from http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-VAW.html; INTERNET.